

Friday's Feature
By
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Insect hoards can be alarming but may not be a problem

Many people, while cleaning up their yard following the recent tropical storm, noticed alarming clusters of insects on their trees. Masses of insects can be shocking, but are not necessarily unusual or harmful. Two insects that have been reported lately are psocids and walnut caterpillars.

Psocids (pronounced so-sids) are tiny insects. Adult psocids are about one-fourth inch in length and brownish-black in color with some white markings on their wings. They have many common names including webbing barklice and tree cattle, referring to the way the adults congregate and move together en masse on trees.

Many people will never actually see the psocid insect but will definitely notice their webbing. Very fine silken webbing will completely cover the trunk and branches of backyard trees. The psocid webbing often seems to occur overnight and can be quite alarming. It is thought that the webbing is to protect the psocids from predators or to create a more favorable environment underneath.



Trunk covered in
webbing produced by
psocids

Psocids can be considered beneficial insects because they clean our tree bark. They feed on lichen and other decaying organic matter. We encourage people to leave these insects alone. Usually the webbing will go away in a couple of weeks. Because psocids are not harmful, control measures are not recommended.

Another insect cluster appearing now is the walnut caterpillar. This caterpillar is the immature stage of a beautiful, cinnamon brown moth. It is one of the handmaid moths.

The walnut caterpillar is widespread and feeds on a wide variety of deciduous trees. Most often, they are found on walnuts, pecans, and hickories.

The moths emerge in the spring and summer and



Walnut caterpillars

usually lay their eggs in June and July. The moth's larvae or caterpillar has a ravenous appetite and feeds on leaves. Young caterpillars are cinnamon in color with white stripes, and older caterpillars are black with white hairs. They have a strange habit of crawling down onto the trunk in a very large group to molt. Full-grown caterpillars drop to the ground and crawl around looking for a place to pupate. They overwinter as pupae in the soil.

Healthy mature trees are not harmed by a little defoliation. Very young trees or stressed trees that are completely defoliated two years in a row may be stunted or injured and may require control measures.

If you have walnut caterpillars, there are several non-toxic remedies available to you. You can simply clip off and destroy the foliage or small branches where the caterpillars are feeding. You can also handpick the larvae from the tree trunks or low branches and destroy them. Or, you can spray the foliage with the biopesticide Bt, commonly sold as Dipel and Thuricide.



Walnut caterpillars
massing on a pecan
tree

Although some trees infested with the walnut caterpillar may be heavily defoliated, tree death is very rare. Chemical control is usually not necessary and may interfere with the thirteen species of beneficial insects and spiders that attack the walnut caterpillar.

It's always a good idea to identify an insect before attempting to control it with an insecticide. Frequently, beneficial insects will take care of a pest problem for you. If you do spray, spray smart. Like psocids, not all insects are pests.

Tip of the Week: The sudden appearance of mushrooms is common in Gulf Coast landscapes. They can literally pop up overnight. Frequent summer rains means more mushrooms of various sizes and shapes. With few exceptions, they do not cause diseases of landscape plants. Some are poisonous if ingested. There is no environmentally safe fungicide that can be recommended for mushroom control. Gardeners should accept and appreciate this special group of fungi. In cases where the mushrooms are objectionable they can be removed by hand or mowed.

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